

A Guide to Being a History TA

2. LEARNING STYLES, LEADING TUTORIALS AND EFFECTIVE GRADING

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Introductory Remarks:

According to the Teaching Support Centre's TA Training Program, 100% of TAs at Western do grading, irrespective of department or discipline. For some this is their sole major responsibility, while for others it is one of several teaching-related responsibilities, like leading tutorials. But these different duties should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Both are an opportunity to interact with your students, provide them with meaningful and constructive feedback, and ultimately help them understand the course content to the best of their abilities.

Both of these activities are, as one might imagine, supported by a vast amount of scholarship seeking to understand them. The approach followed here takes its cues from pedagogical research on how people learn. It provides a brief overview of four major "Learning Styles," following educational theorist David Kolb's research on the subject. Understanding how our students learn helps us engage with them effectively, and ultimately makes the course materials easier to understand. Moreover, understanding learning styles can teach us about ourselves, since our own teaching tends to mirror our preferred learning styles. By identifying our own biases in learning, we can confront and overcome our biases in teaching to reach our students more effectively.

Preceding a discussion of learning styles are a series of practical tips and suggestions on how to approach tutorial planning, organized around the principle of "Active Learning." In other words, they are designed to get every student participating and encourage their ongoing interest in the subject. The final section gives advice on how to produce effective feedback as well as rubric design. Quality feedback and effective tutorial planning will improve relations with your students, while also sparing you from dealing with complaints or grade revisions.

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TUTORIALS

Leading Tutorials:

Having done all the basic organizational stuff, like getting a class list, preparing a lesson plan, and establishing what materials need to be covered, you now find yourself in front of your first tutorial. Similarly, your students now find themselves in front of their TA. The room is silent, not least because you and they aren't quite sure what to expect. The first tips I can offer are simple, but important in establishing rapport:

1. Introduce yourself. Don't be afraid to show some humanity, but keep it professional.
2. Get the students to do the same!
3. Use student names all the time. Say them out loud. Use them before they answer a question. Get them to remind you if you forget.
 - a. After week one, greet them by their names as they come in the door.

While none of that seems "academic," it enhances your ability to integrate them into the more intellectual side of things. If your students have a sense that you know who they are and what they are like, they'll be more likely to respect what you are asking of them.

Apart from the basics of building rapport and developing a sense of a learning community, you ultimately need to teach them. The question is: how much of that teaching can you convince them to do amongst or by themselves? This is actually a main objective of one of pedagogy's most powerful approaches, called **Active Learning**.

Characteristics of Active Learning Exercises

- Incorporates all students in the class
- Is considerate of the learning styles involved
- Has an objective related to the course materials
- Uses clear and simple instructions
- Employs practical, transferable skills

You are only limited by your imagination in how these characteristics can be manifested. Some TAs play quiz-type games with both written and oral components; others using grouping exercises to help students confront difference or differing opinions. The main point here is to involve everyone as much as possible! Use activities that get the social butterfly to slow down and do some quiet thinking, or that get the shyer, more passive student to express him/herself verbally. Some suggested activities include:

Debate: (20-40 minutes)

Prep level: Moderate. Materials need to be understood quite well and the TA needs to have questions prepared as a moderator.

How to do it: Find a historical issue that prompted much debate. Divide the class in two, with each side arguing pro or con. Establish that even if they don't believe in their position, the objective is to understand opposing viewpoints. Run it like a standard debate: two minutes for opening remarks, one minute for rebuttal, a Q&A session, and a period of back-and-forth open debate are all possibilities. Remember that all students need to help prep their side and/or speak on its behalf.

Added twist: Deliberately ask students to oppose their own "natural" position on an issue. Sometimes the best education comes from critiquing one's own opinions!

Snowball: (10-30 minutes)

Prep level: Low. Most work can be done in-class.

How to do it: As a class, students come up with the central focus or theme of a lecture, phrased as an essay/exam question (ex. What caused the American Revolution?). Divide the class into pairs, and in those pairings each comes up with the three points they would use to answer the question. Join the pairs to form foursomes who should now have six points (some may be duplicates). In that newly formed foursome, they whittle their six points down to three and refine those three points if required. Join two foursomes to make eight, etc. The objective is to come up with three excellent study points that the whole class can get behind, while also hopefully seeing how seemingly minor points can be used to enhance the more important ones.

Added twist: Once you've got two groups left, have them defend their three choices in a debate format.

Reflection Paper: (2-5 minutes)

Prep level: Very low. The TA just needs to have a pointed question to ask the class.

How to do it: Often used as an opening activity, the TA puts a question on the board and asks students to quietly write a response to it. It is usually something related to the lecture content or readings (ex. How does Engels describe the conditions of the working class in Britain?). The objective is not to craft a comprehensive answer, but rather to jog students' memories, and use their answers as a springboard into a deeper discussion.

Added twist: Ask students to pass their answers one person to the left. That person then writes another 2-5 minutes in response to the first answer, and then passes it back. This can be done several times to create a learning dialogue.

Parking Lot, or Muddiest Point: (5 minutes)

Prep level: None. The students are the ones identifying what they need clarification on

How to do it: Reserve a small section of the board as your "parking lot," and any time a point raised in class or discussion isn't clear, it goes into that space. Students have to come up and write it in themselves. Reserve some time at the end of class, or maybe between activities, to have students offer clarification for one another (or if time is short, TAs can clarify themselves).

Added twist: Use these items as the basis for a quiz or a game that you'll present the following week.

In general, the thing to observe is that you are getting your students to do most of the work in class. Instill in your students a sense that *they* are the summarizers and synthesizers, not you. You are there because you already know the materials, and your first priority is to provide them with effective guidance and support for them to flourish as self-directed learners who trust and gain from their ability to relate to others.

LEARNING STYLES

Learning Styles:

Now that you have a few activities in your back pocket, we can dig a little deeper into how they operate alongside pedagogical theory and the ways in which people learn. Educational theorist David Kolb offers a simple model of how people learn. There are four categories of learning, with the first two (CE and AC) being opposites, as are the last two (RO and AE):

Concrete Experience (CE)

Likes examples and peer learning

Abstract Conceptualization (AC)

Likes theory and learning from an authority figure

Reflective Observation (RO)

Likes to think objectively and prefers impartiality

Active Experimentation (AE)

Likes to employ trial-and-error as well as open discussions

Kolb sees these learning styles as a *spectrum of learning*. We do all of these things at various times but we tend to prefer one approach over the others *when we learn new concepts*. The trick is to offer your students the opportunity to try all of these approaches, either in the classroom or via feedback, so they can explore their own learning and approach the materials from different perspectives.

It's worth thinking about your own learning style, because that will inform your teaching style as well as your perceptions of what might actually be going on with your students. For instance, consider the following:

1. A silent classroom: This may sometimes be a sign of unpreparedness, but it could simply be that some of your students are in the RO category and are pondering all sides of an issue before answering.
2. A student wants you to tell him what's on the exam: This is not necessarily laziness, but could instead be a sign of an AC type who respects your authority.
3. A student doesn't want your interpretation of the readings: This could be viewed as disrespectful, but might also be characteristic of an AE type who needs to bounce ideas off you or others in order to come to an understanding of the materials.
4. A student wonders aloud, "What's the point?": This could be seen as disparaging the material, but might just signal that the student seeks an application for new knowledge, which is typical of CE.

All of these students can be won over by varying one's approach to the materials they're expected to learn. The RO might thrive with an opportunity to write down pros/cons to an argument, while the AE would open up in a discussion. The AC might appreciate you taking a hands-on approach with the readings, while CE prefers examining a relevant case study.

The take-home point here is simply that one should always strive for variation in one's teaching approach. Learning operates as a dialogue, and finding ways to reach your students begins by piquing their curiosity and interest, and then rounding out their skills in relation to the course materials.

GRADING AND FEEDBACK

Effective Grading and Feedback:

As mentioned above, all of you will have some grading to do. You will need to learn to be *efficient* so you don't blow through all of your allotted hours while only marking half your stack of papers. More importantly by far, you must develop skills that help you be *consistent and fair*, not only to the whole class for each assignment, but also to the individual whose work you assess throughout the year. Finally, your feedback should follow **four key principles of effective feedback**, sometimes shortened as COSA:

be Constructive:

Your primary focus should be the student's improvement.

be Objective:

Never make it about the person: it's about the work the person has produced.

be Specific:

Ex. "On p.3 it says X but on p.5 it says Y. These seem to contradict each other."

keep it Actionable:

Make suggestions, but suggest alternatives that can be reasonably accomplished by the student according to level, experience and time constraints.

And be sure to praise the things they did right! Build up their trust in you as an instructor, guide, and critic. A little credibility can go a long way.

Keeping the above in mind can help put you in the right frame of mind from the outset when you start your grading. Still, it is fairly common for TAs to get bogged down in less important things or to feel they've just gone through a string of papers that show little understanding of the material. The following tips can help you stay in the zone a little better:

Tips, Tricks and Logistics of Grading

Note: it is very likely that your professor will have their own grading protocols to follow, especially where answer keys, rubrics, feedback standards, and so on are concerned. If this document conflicts with the instruction you've received, *follow your professor's instructions!*

Before

- Have a clear idea what an answer should include (rubrics can help—see below)
- Provide your students with a rough grading guideline long before the due date
- Randomize the order of the papers to avoid preconceived results
- Give yourself a specific time limit per paper and stick to it

During

- Dedicate a proper block of time to grading, including break time.
- Stop if you are getting tired, upset or angry!
- Skim through and loosely categorize papers before giving a final grade.

- Annotate your observations during your second read; use these as the basis for final remarks.
- Print final comments and attach them to the essay (if you don't have a printer or simply want to save ink, you have every right to ask the instructor or History office to print them for you).
- Focus on only a couple of big-picture things to work on for the next assignment (see below).
- Compare papers in the same grade range for consistency (for ex. mid-70s, 68-72%, etc.).
- Keep a "general comments" sheet of common student errors and provide it to your class.

After

- Consult with your professor before finalizing any grades!
- Write down the grades in print and electronic forms.
- When the professor says assignments may be returned, and unless otherwise instructed, hand back assignments at the end of tutorial, not at the beginning.
- Schedule individual debriefings if time allows for it, but only 24 hours after an assignment has been returned; this requires students to take some time to process your evaluation and reflect upon their work.
- For re-grading requests, ask that they are submitted in writing with the specific concern identified; you will only re-evaluate the identified item(s).

Celebrate the end of grading: a night out, a dinner with friends or a gaming binge can all be suitable rewards. But do take some time for yourself—you deserve it! And if you feel these tips aren't enough, read on just a little further for more specific advice on how to phrase a paragraph of written feedback, or how to get started in creating your own rubric.

The Nitty Gritty of Written Feedback

- Identify what you perceive to be their argument and how they supported it.
 - It's nice to let them know you read their paper and didn't just slap a grade on it!
 - This requires no more than a sentence or two: "Fred, your topic of X was cleverly supported by A, B and C, etc..."
- There is a commonly used "sandwich approach" to writing feedback on an essay: start with the good, transition to the thing(s) that need the most work, and finish with something nice. Though it is a cliché, it seems to work as a way of communicating a critique. Here is an example of the sandwich:
 - "Your paragraph structure is excellent, opening with a clear topic sentence, moving through your supporting evidence, and concluding with sentences that identify how it relates to your thesis and then transitioning to the next point in a logical way. Well done!"
 - "That said, I would like you to be more judicious with your evidence. Sometimes you appear to be using the first book you found on a topic, rather than finding one properly suited to the argument you are making. Along those lines, when you used source H, I felt like you misinterpreted their main point to mean something other than intended. It's a tricky point they're making, but you need to be more careful."

- “Nonetheless, you employ a wide array of sources to support your points A, B and C, including some less conventional ones. Your creativity in using these sources is obvious, so just work to ensure your reader can understand how and why they were selected.”
- If a student made some more common mistakes along the way, point those out in point form and refer them to your sheet of common student writing errors.
- Finally, always leave a standing offer to discuss their next assignment with them during your office time.

Creating a Rubric

For many in History, a rubric may be too rigid an evaluation tool. Ultimately, the type of assignment may determine you'd like to use one or not (there are many ready-made online rubrics if time is a factor). Irrespective of what method you use for evaluation, it is nonetheless important to have a **grading strategy** that considers:

- What the question is asking of the student, both in its substance and the course content required to answer it?
- What form should a response take?
- What, according to the course design and teaching emphasis, ought to be the highest priorities for the evaluator?

Rubrics can help speed up your grading with a little investment beforehand, but they can also lock you into a less-than-satisfactory, often rigid evaluation scale. Striking a balance between these things is important, and ultimately you need consider the type of assignment your students are being asked to do.

- Specifically, an essay doesn't always lend itself to a strict, numerical assessment. A student with poor grammar might still produce an excellent argument, and likewise a beautiful writer might be very thin on evidence. Allowing yourself some leeway is important.
- Some assignments set very long, detailed questions. These can be put into rubric form easily, as shown below.

Before creating a rubric, speak with your professor! Not only might they already have a rubric for you, but all evaluation tools must be vetted since the course is ultimately your professor's responsibility. Besides, they can help you develop the rubric's criteria.

- If you opt to use a rubric, save it as a template, and create a copy for each unique student in your class. Enter the information digitally in order to retain a copy for yourself. You may also wish to allow room for additional comments.
- There are two major types of rubric you can use, plus a combination method:

Numerical

Identifies key areas of an assignment and gives each a scaled value:

Introduction	Topic is clear Points of argument identified Thesis Statement	1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 5 Total out of 15:
Body Paragraphs	1: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● topic sentence ● quality of evidence 	Etc.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> related to thesis transition quality 2: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> etc. Arguments are ordered in a logical way Etc.	
Conclusion	Etc.	Etc.
Writing and Style	Grammar quality Appropriate tone Appropriate formatting Etc.	Etc.

Total out of 100: _____

Evaluative

Still identifies key components of a quality assignment, but allows a more impressionistic approach. This type can be helpful if a TA wants to be able to shift more/less emphasis to specific aspects of the assignment on a discretionary basis—though this should always be explained and justified. Since it doesn't tend to use hard numbers except at the very end, however, it can be difficult to make it conform to Western's numerical grading scale:

http://www.registrar.uwo.ca/student_records/transcripts/grading_scale/pa_conversion.html.

Ideally, this is used merely by the grader to keep track of an assignment's most important components and keep feedback focused and topical.

Introduction	The topic is clearly identified, points or argument are introduced in a logical fashion, and there is a clear thesis statement.	Letter grade: A B C D F
Body Paragraphs	Etc.	Letter grade:
Conclusion	Etc.	Letter grade:
Writing and Style	The student has employed appropriate grammar and formatting, citations are done in Chicago Style, quotations are integrated into sentences, etc...	Letter grade:

Total out of 100: _____

Combination

Each section of the rubric is given a rough percentage value of the final mark, rather than allowing for subjective weighting of each section relative to the final grade (ex. Intro: 20%, Body Paragraphs: 40%, Conclusion: 5%, Writing Quality: 15%, Evidence and Sources: 20%).

Final Remarks

Good luck and happy grading! No, really. Grade in a good mood. It works out better for everyone.